TALES OF MEN WITH TAILS

On the other side of the river and beyond the distant hills there dwells a peculiar tribe of not-quite-human beings. . . .

By Michael Goss

"'LOOK, TUAN, look!' the corporal gasped, and pointed with shaking finger. 'Look, he has a tail — it's not a man — it has a tail!'. . . . Dennis looked, following the pointing finger, then bending down, looked long and closely. It was as the corporal said. The man possessed a tail — a long hard protuberance that projected from his spine for about four inches. . . ."

Despite this "Si Urag of the Tail," central curiosity in Oscar Cook's curious yarn of the same title, definitely *is* a man. Dennis, the hero, meets him when investigating a series of weird disappearances which have brought terror to the Sabah district of northeastern Borneo* over which he holds jurisdiction. Captured in the act of carrying off a sentry, Si Urag settles on the hut floor (digging a small hole in the soil to accommodate his tail so that he can sit comfortably) and tells his story.

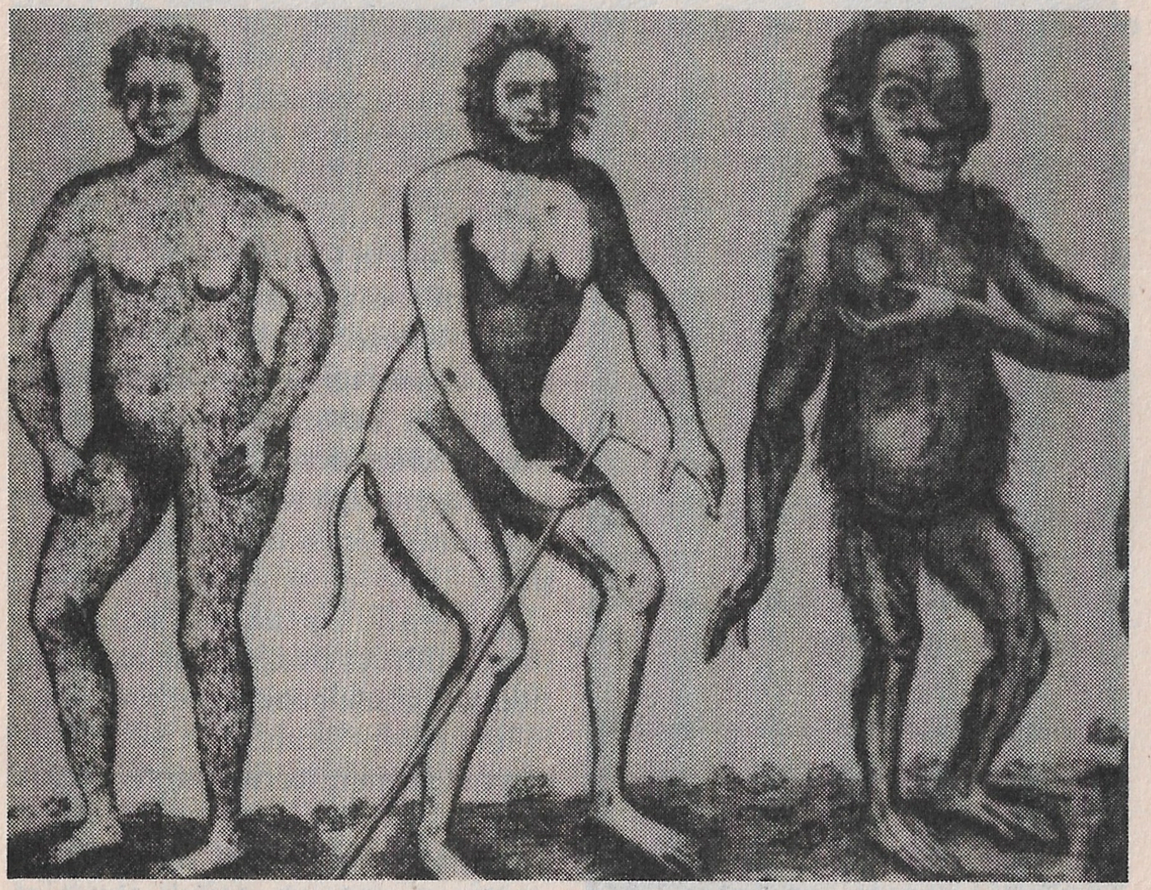
He is the last survivor of a Murut race successively decimated by plague, Malay slavers and tree-dwelling dwarfs. These last did not kill him immediately because they saw that, like them, he had a tail; in any case, before they could take further action, most were ensnared by a giant man-eating orchid. To Si Urag, an outcast from birth due to his caudal peculiarity, this carnivorous plant became a savior to be honored with living sacrifices: animals *and* humans, including those unfortunates who have disappeared from their villages. The story ends as members of Dennis' party empty their guns into the monstrosity, just after Si Urag has performed a last act of homage by throwing himself into its maw.

"Si Urag" is fiction. Yet the tailed men of Borneo (as the writer probably knew) had been recorded for centuries as sober fact. A 1653 account relates that someone just returned from the Dutch East Indies informed the anatomist Dr. Harvey that "in the remote places of the island of Borneo there is a certain kind of tailed men." One captured specimen had "a thick fleshy tail of a span long" (approximately nine inches).

*More properly, Sarawak. "Borneo" is used here in its geophysical rather than political sense.

Conceivably the speaker was referring to the Poonangs. A September 1860 supplement to the Dutch publication *Vereeniging Christelyke Stemmen* describes them as the shy inhabitants of the Bornean interior with faces more prominent than those of other tribes and excessively wide mouths. They spoke a purely monosyllabic tongue unrelated to neighboring native languages. Another reason not much was known about the Poonangs was their habit of taking fright easily — a habit that led them to go into hiding and perforate the source of their annoyance with poisoned darts shot from blowpipes.

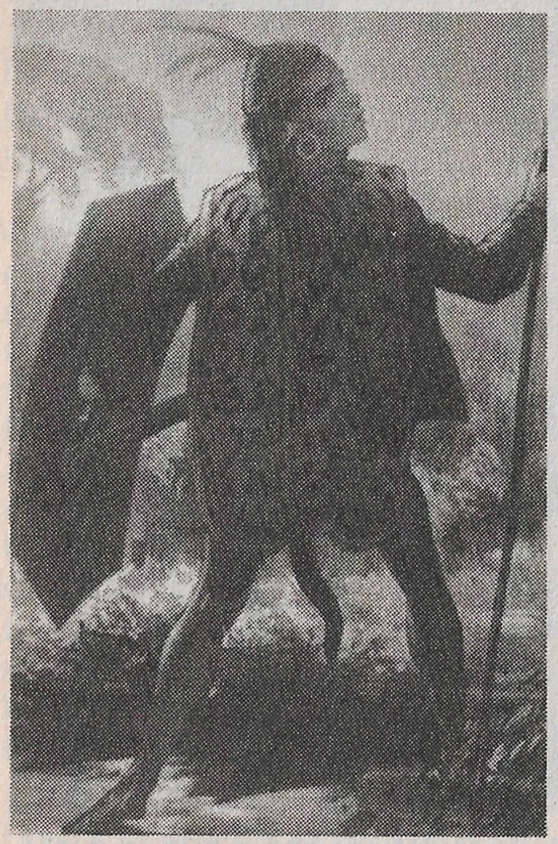
"But the most remarkable feature of all," the article continues, "is that they have tails like the animals and which are longer in one individual than in the other, while those of the females are very short and of a softer kind than with the males. The common size of this appendage is between three and five inches. On the whole . . . it is hard, stiff and



Tailed men figure prominently in early speculations about human evolution. In this 18th-Century illustration the tailed *Homo luciferus* was supposed to represent a form of uncivilized humanity which pre-Darwinian writers held to be intermediate between mankind and the apes.

nearly immovable which makes sitting an impossibility." Consequently the Poonangs carried around wooden blocks with holes sunk through them to act as chairs when they sat, "first having carefully put their tail in the perforation."

The Poonangs were said to be widely distributed throughout inland Borneo. A Mr. van Houtrop saw three who had been taken prisoner in the province of Brouw and after examination pronounced their tails "neither a sham nor a diseased excrescence." He hoped to transport some (dead or alive) to Holland for the benefit of the Royal Academy of Sciences. As late as 1904 the *Morning Chronicle* reported that a German traveler had seen a six-year-old "Poenan" boy with a tail "not very long, but flexible, hairless and about the thickness of one's little finger."



When animal-skin costumes retained tails of their former owners, some observers may have thought tails belonged to present owners.

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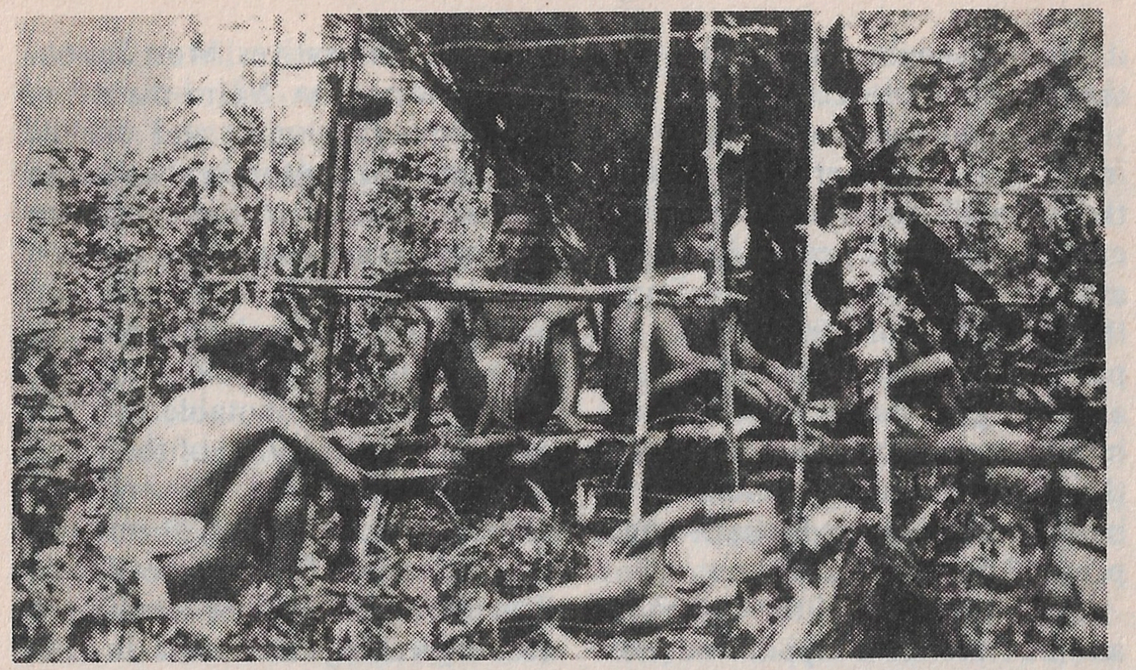
ACCOUNTS of physically bizarre folk dwelling in lands almost as unknown as the far side of the moon reach back to Classical times. Beside the headless people with eyes in their chests and dog-headed occupants of Libya recounted by Herodotus in the Fifth Century B.C., tailed men must have sounded positively ordinary. And in the Fourth Century B.C. Ctesias wrote of Indian tribes like the Sciapodes whose single foot enabled them to outrun any mere biped and served as umbrella or sunshade. Megasthenes described people with ears big enough to act as both mattress and cover when they needed to sleep.

Generally speaking, belief in these oddities declined as exploration and trade penetrated previously unknown lands. Yet somehow the tailed-men stories survived this process of erosion. Far from disproving such claims, the gradual exploration (and exploitation) of the Old World's tropical expanses brought additional rumors to the attention of Westerners.



In turn-of-the-century photograph of Punans in Sarawak, nomadic natives take up temporary shelter in simple jungle hut. Persistent legends of "Poonangs" — possibly the Punans — allege that these people possess prominent tails. Despite reports and rumors claim has yet to be verified.

In India — long seen as the home of all kinds of fabulous beings, including Ctesias' dog-headed folk who spoke in barks and wore tails like dogs "but longer and more hairy" — male rulers of the Ranas supposedly sported tails which could be wagged from side to side: status symbols, proof of their divine ancestry. When the mysteries of India showed signs of beginning to pall, reports of tailed folk came from ever-tantalizing Tibet where sometime prior to 1806 Capt. Samuel Turner heard of mountain dwellers "with extremely short straight tails which . . . were extremely inconvenient to them, as they were inflexible." They solved this problem after the fashion of Si Urag by digging holes for themselves when they wished to sit down.

European involvement in southeastern Asia brought more reports of the same, such as Henri Maitre's turn-of-the-century narrative mentioning a Nam-Noung tailed race testified to by the Moi. Described as primitive wanderers, they were alleged to be small and physically unusual quite apart from their tails. The Moi said they had thick reddish hair, limbs that did not bend (owing to a lack of knees or elbows!) and a knifelike forearm by means of which they cut paths through the jungle. But, as Bernard Heuvelmans wryly remarks, the inhab-

itants of Annam accused the Moi themselves of possessing tails!

To the far south where Asia disintegrates into a series of islands, the same stories were told by different travelers. Skeat, the great authority on Malay folklore, found the "Orang Ekor" sporadically reported across the peninsula, again as a vestigial, elusive race shunning human contact and wearing only the most rudimentary clothing — bark loincloths from beneath which peeped the wearer's tail.

Quite the equal of the Poonangs and of Purchas' Filippino oddities were the folk reported by John Janssen Struys after his visit to Formosa around 1650. A tailed man was captured after he murdered a person who had strayed from the main party. The prisoner attributed his tail (a foot long, "covered with red hair and very like that of a cow") to "the effect of the climate, for all the inhabitants of the southern side of the island . . . were provided with like appendages." Struys, until then skeptical of such tales, so to speak, could not deny what his eyes told him, which was "that this man had a tail I so distinctly saw as that he had a head." Struys wrote that he witnessed the execution (by public burning) of the tailed man.

Not surprisingly, considering Africa's reputation as a place of marvels, travelers returned from the Dark Continent with a quota of tailed-men narratives. Most famous of all were the Niam-niams of Abyssinia (Ethiopia) and around the mid-19th Century white visitors seemed almost to vie with one another in reports of them.

First came C. L. du Couret with his 1849 account to the Academy of Sciences in Paris about the "Ghilanes" who were notable for "the external prolongation of the vertebral column, which in every individual, male or female, forms of a tail of [up] to three inches long." This much he deduced from interviewing a slave who owned (in addition to a tail!) the ability to speak good Arabic. At least three other European visitors to Abyssinia heard comparable things.

In 1851 M. de Castelnau reported that a group of male and female Niam-niams caught sleeping in the sun and slaughtered by the Haoussas all had tails of 40 centimeters (15 ½ inches) and three centimeters (1 ¼ inches) in diameter. Presumably the tailed folk seen by a priest 15 days south of Herrar (and duly related by d'Abbadie, also in 1851) were also Niam-niams, although he noted that only the men had tails —adding that he had seen 15 of these individuals and was "positive that the tail is natural."

But when writing of *his* Abyssinian travels 10 years later, Dr. Joseph Wolff asserted that there were tailed folk of *both* sexes. Some near Narea had appendages strong

enough to fell a horse!

Around the same time Dr. Hubsch's attention was captivated by a (tailed) female slave who, her owner disclosed, belonged to the Niam-niam. The dealer assured him that males and females alike had tails of no less than 24 inches, though on Hubsch's own testimony this particular woman's was a beggarly couple of inches: smooth, hairless and terminating in a point. Nor did he fail to notice how her teeth were planted in curious forward-inclining sockets (the canines were filed). In keeping with this unprepossessing visage she ate raw meat and seemed uncomfortable in clothes — understandable enough, since her tribe reputedly lived in a state of total nudity.

Tailed natives appeared occasionally in the slave markets — some dealers were said to dock their tails to make them more salable — but the master of the one Hubsch saw complained that despite the low asking price nobody was interested in her. Apparently prospective customers didn't mind the tail so much as her partiality for human flesh; on top of everything else her tribe supposedly ate their own deceased relatives as well as their prisoners-of-war. Hubsch wrote that on another occasion he saw a man of the same race but again his tail (which bore a few hairs) failed to measure up to the promised two-foot length. In fact it was only half an inch long.

The Niam-niam spoke a primitive language (with a few Arabic words thrown in) but this, like their preference for nudity, didn't mean they were uncivilized. They planted maize and wheat and raised cattle. Du Couret remarked that besides the obvious difference they were an unexceptional, handsome Negroid race. It seems a little puzzling why or how he missed the tokens of cannibalism — the forward-pointing teeth — which so repelled Hubsch and potential slave-buyers. Perhaps the tailed folk referred to collectively as "Niam-niam" were actually several distinct peoples, while the tailed "Nya-nyas" or "Niag-namnaus" who, Lynch wrote in the *Levant Quarterly Review* for April 1861, dwelled on the White River three days' travel from Khartoum may have been different again.

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WESTERN wonder-seekers, who assumed that all out-of-the-way African tribes wore tails, would have been astounded to learn that these tribes often believed the same thing about *them*. "Yes," replied a village headsman in 1861 when Dr. Livingstone asked if he had heard of cannibals or people with tails, "but we have always understood that these and other monstrosities are met with only among you seagoing people." It explained, for instance, why white men wore breeches; obviously they were ashamed of their monkeylike

tails. One Victorian explorer of central Africa was reportedly plagued by requests from native princes who wanted to see his tail.

But this was just the latest variant on an ages-old slur leveled at Britons. "That an Englishman cannot travel in another land by way of merchandise or any other honest occupying," raged the outspoken mid-1500's reformer John Bale, eyeing the "manifest lies" of continental monks and priests, without having it "thrown in his teeth that all Englishmen have tails." It was an insult most frequently hurled at them by the French.

For their part the English leveled the same charge at rival nations — a 1653 source claims that among 700 Irish put to the sword during the storming of Cashell "diverse had tails near a quarter of a yard long" — or sometimes against each other. There was no reason why a good nationalist insult shouldn't be turned into a regionalist one. Kent, the English county closest to France, was often said to harbor a population of men with tails.

In the early years of this century sailors traveling by train to join their ship at Plymouth, Devon, caused a stir by leaning out of the carriage windows, "chaffing the people at the stations and asking them about their tails."

The Devonians doubtless regarded that as an unfounded slander, having brought up their children to believe that it was the folk of neighboring Cornwall who had the tails. Antiquarian and folklorist (and Devonshire man) the Rev. Sabine Baring-Gould could still recall his childish disbelief when a friendly Cornish bookseller vehemently scouted the suggestion: "I believe I satisfied my mind that the good man had sat his off and my nurse assured me that such was the case with those of sedentary habits."

In maturity he could no longer subscribe to the belief, nor could most of his countrymen — at least so far as the idea of tailed *Englishmen* or whites in general was concerned. But there were all those travelers' accounts, many of them from Christian gentlemen or other unimpeachably honest observers. . . .

In fact it *is* hard to dismiss all the material on the Poonangs, Niamniams and the rest as nothing more than reworked, revived travelers' fantasies or mistakes inspired by meetings between careless observers and large members of the monkey family. Quite clearly, these reporters identified the caudated (tailed) beings they saw as *human* — primitive, maybe, but patently human. They wore clothes (sometimes) and spoke recognizable languages; some planted crops, used tools and worked metals.

But slowly the suspicion grew that tailed people were more closely related to monkeys than to men. In this way they provided fuel for

speculation in the pre-Darwinian stirrings of thought about the evolutionary relationship between man and ape. If man had sprung from the monkeys (which is more than Darwin ever suggested), these tailed races hadn't sprung quite so far as the rest of us.

Something along those lines seems to have occurred to the eccentric James Burnett, Lord Monboddo, whom Dr. Johnson mentioned derisively as "a Scotch judge who has lately written a book about the origin of language, in which he traces monkeys up to men." Monboddo's enthusiastic approval of the evidence for tailed humanity didn't win a tolerant audience for the other arguments in his six-volume *The Origin and Progress of Language* (1773-1792) any more than did his opinion that mankind would have been all the better for having tails, if only as a more adequate means of expressing its emotions.

He was said to have been profoundly disappointed when Sir Joseph Banks returned from the South Seas unable to confirm that he'd seen tailed men anywhere on his travels. "Other people have strange notions, but they conceal them," said Johnson. "If they have tails, they hide them; but Monboddo is as jealous of his tail as a squirrel."

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THEN CAME Darwin and some of what Monboddo had said seemed a little less ludicrous. *Homo caudatus* might even be the conjectured "missing link" in the monkey-to-man series. "The question has often occurred to me," Carl Bock mused in 1881, "whether Mr. Darwin received the first suggestion of man's simian descent from the fables concerning the existence of tailed men . . . or whether the natives of the Malay Archipelago and the South Sea Islands, having read the *Descent of Man*, have conspired together to hoax the white man with well-concocted stories of people possessed of tails, living in inaccessible districts, and maintaining but slight intercourse with the outer world."

The second proposition, as we have seen, was chronologically impossible because the stories of tailed men had been around long before Charles Darwin. The germ contained in the first statement, though, was a theoretical possibility: Tailed Man might be an intermediate stage in the Darwinian process.

Unhappily, this theoretical possibility never evolved into anything like confirmed fact. When looked for, the tailed men strangely vanished; when hints and rumors were followed up, the trail petered out. Bornean travelers found the Poonangs always lived a few days away from where they happened to be —never where they *were* — and native sources of information weren't exactly beyond reproach. Whites

found them unhelpfully vague when it came to defining precisely where the tailed folk lived. Those who tried to pursue the casual directions usually ended up disillusioned.

Perhaps, Frank Hatton suggested, the myth arose from an occasional tribal custom of wearing monkey skins around the waist, tails dangling down behind so that at a distance the wearer resembled one of the fabled race. This wouldn't explain the cases where the witnesses saw those tails at close range, however — examined, handled and measured them — but the fact remained that the tailed people had a tendency to be missing when actively searched for.

In one instance the aboriginals named in some of the more exciting reports *were* found. The Poonangs, or at least a tribe with a similar name, are still with us. The Punan occupy an area straddling the borders of Sarawak, Brunei and the Kalimantam district of northern Borneo and conform in certain respects with the tailed folk of the 1860 Dutch source. Nomadic hunter-gatherers confined to the forest (although that way of life is changing as many settle down to become farmers), they live in groups of 30 to 40, building simple structures and moving from one area to the next as the forest's supplies of tapioca and game are exhausted. They are also famed for their skill with the blowpipe and may be the last Bornean people actually to manufacture these weapons.

But there the resemblance ends. The Punans do *not* have tails. It may be that despite the similarity of the names they are not the Poonangs of historical records. Some anthropologists think that "Poonan" was formerly applied to any party of people wandering the jungle to collect its produce — perhaps only temporarily — instead of to a specific tribe.

Some Victorians hoped that the tailed men existed as an unknown race of primitives left behind or sidestepped by the evolutionary march toward the perfect form now exhibited by mankind. Linnaeus had implied as much in the 10th edition of his *System of Nature* (1758) when he distinguished between *Homo sapiens* and *Homo monstrosus*, a loose classification of weirdly-made humans which included the tailed satyrs (*Simia satyrus*) who were nearer to apes than to men. His pupil Hoppius thought that *Homo luciferus* (named for the devilish tail) was about midway between *Homo sapiens* and the ape kingdom. Whatever else was true, it was plain that they must be inferior to the rest of humanity. Here, perhaps, is a key to the persistence of the belief.

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IF STORIES of tailed men signified a romantic response to the mysteries locked up in faraway

places, they also reflected the tellers' sense of superiority. Tailed Man was a symbol of the bestial origins above which the human race had risen. Hence the aptness of that symbol for purposes of insult: your less-civilized neighbors carried tails as proof that they *were* less civilized.

As the young Baring-Gould had once believed of the Cornish, "I looked upon those who dwelt across the Tamar as 'uncanny,' as being scarcely to be classed with Christian people." Of course it was no accident that theologians considered Satan tail-free until his fall from grace, at which time the former bright angel had grown one as a visible sign that he was now degraded to the level of a brute beast.

As a result, between the 17th and 19th Centuries readers not only could believe in the tailed races attested to by travelers but simultaneously could believe the worst of them. They were not merely primitive but also morally unenlightened, if not actually depraved. Du Couret's "Ghilanes" were "all idolaters and cannibals." Hubsch was told the Niam-niams had "an utter disregard for morality, incest and adultery being common," and had no religion. Perhaps worst of all, they made poor slaves owing to their taste for human flesh and Hubsch was assured they had been known to massacre and eat children placed in their charge.

Yet, all else aside, there is no doubt whatever that tailed people — or, more accurately, tailed individuals — are a fact of nature. Pediatrician Joseph Warkany, author of *Congenital Malformations*, writes that persons born with tails are "obviously very rare, but individuals born with tail-like appendages *do* exist."

All humans have a "tail" in their earliest moments of existence, but usually by the fetus' eighth week of development it disappears when the four terminal vertebrae fuse into the coccyx. Very occasionally, however, they fail to do so and may even extend to form a boneless, mobile and bare (or scantily-haired) growth projecting some way beyond the buttocks. These pseudotails seldom exceed lengths of four to five inches. They may be straight, segmented or curled and (as Dr. Warkany adds) can be wagged from side to side. Unlike Si Urag's they are normally soft and are removed by a simple operation.

Authorities stress that they are essentially no more than a minor congenital abnormality and not an especially common one. A researcher uncovered only 22 reliably-recorded cases in medical history, which would explain why the phenomenon has tended to arouse overdramatic reactions down the centuries. The latest reports come from China where the Xinhua news agency mentions two tailed chil-

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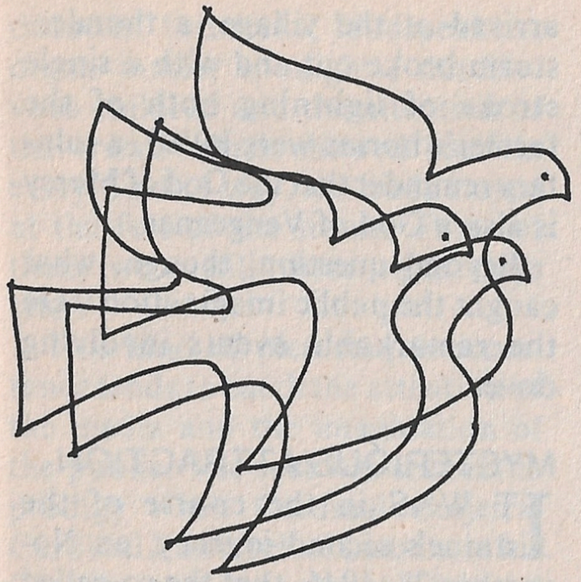
dren born in 1984, the second (from Hanzhou, Zhejiang) having a smooth, flesh-colored tail four inches long and one-third of an inch in diameter. And as if to corroborate what the medieval French used to believe, there have also been tailed Englishmen: a boy born at Newcastle around 1882 had a 1½-inch appendage which he was said to wag when happy and in 1934 a three-inch, piglike equivalent which X ray revealed to be boneless was removed from a five-week-old child in a London hospital.

But what of whole tribes — the Niam-niams, the Poonangs — who reportedly flourished tails as racial characteristics? In early times it would have been easy for incautious or optimistic marvel-seekers to suppose that freakishly-adorned solitary persons they met were typical of whole nations. Yet in Struys' account a man with a tail not under a foot long says that in his country such decorations were the rule rather than the exception and while he couldn't rival this in terms of length, Du Couret's slave claimed he was only one from a people of over 30,000. Unless either writers or speakers were talking for effect (or joking!), the trait sounds more common and more extensive than medical science acknowledges.

It is just feasible that within isolated, inbreeding simple communities an atavistic trait such as retention and even development of the tail could be handed down through successive generations. The Rana rulers of ancient India may have demonstrated this on a confined scale, as did a case known to Dr. Hubsch in which the son of a Constantinople physician was born with a half-inch tail just as his grandfather had been. Among smaller populations segregated by choice or environment the "rogue genes" responsible for producing this sort of reversion might have passed from family to family, ending in to what all intents and purposes was a race which shared it as a local physical characteristic.

Yet we would need to ask what became of them, why no tailed race has ever been found in modern times. Perhaps there came a day when the tailed people found they were segregated no more. Open to decimation by the forces that fell on Si Urag's tribe — slavers, disease, antagonistic neighbors — they could have passed into folklore before the world had a chance to realize that they were more than a fable.



MIRACLE OF THE DOVES

Were the doves worshipping the Virgin or responding to a mysterious force of nature?

By Hilary Evans

AT CHRISTMAS the Portuguese sing a popular song which contains these lines:

The dove goes flying
flying so fleet
to see who'll be first
at the Virgin's feet.

This popular association of doves with the Virgin Mary seemed to be given a real-life demonstration between 1946 and 1966, when, as a kind of public-relations exercise on behalf of the Catholic Church, statues of Our Lady of Fatima were carried in procession in many parts of the world. In the course of these journeys, doves came to be so closely associated with the statues as to inspire widespread belief that something miraculous was happening.

The statues in question weren't just *any* statues of the Virgin but ones that purported to represent the Virgin as seen in a vision by a group of peasant children at Fatima, Portugal, in 1917. In fact, recent research has shown that the entity seen by the little visionaries and sketched at the time in accordance with their verbal descriptions in no way resembled the conventional Virgin that stands today in the sanctuary at Fatima and of which duplicates adorn Catholic churches throughout the world. All of these statues of the Virgin of Fatima portray the conventional stereotype, a beautiful young woman wearing the traditional blue robes.

Fatima has been a place of pilgrimage ever since the 1917 visions but of course there are many who for financial or health reasons are unable to make the pilgrimage. In 1943, when Portugal was one of the